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FOR NEA/ARP:AMACDONALD

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SUBJECT: BACKROOM DEAL REMOVES BARRIER TO OPPOSITION
PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS, PARTIES AGREE TO A DELAY

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Shoura Council member Mohamed al-Tayeb told the Ambassador and DCM on February 9 that President Saleh had struck a backroom deal with the opposition Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) that is expected to remove a major obstacle to YSP participation in Parliamentary elections. The YSP is not the largest or most powerful of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), but it is believed to be the most strongly opposed to the elections. It has, for some time, linked non-elections related concessions, like the release of political prisoners, to its participation.

¶2. (C) According to Tayeb, a major non-election YSP demand involved the returning of YSP properties in south Yemen that were seized at the time of Yemen's unification. Many of these properties have since been developed, making their return to the YSP problematic. One such property, the former headquarters of YSP's Central Committee, now houses Aden University. Tayeb told the Ambassador and the DCM that a deal had been struck whereby the university would continue to operate on its current site, and the ROYG will pay rent to the YSP. He added that he had been at the Presidential Palace earlier in the day and when he left around 12:00 noon, YSP Secretary General Yassin Saeed Noman had been called in to finalize the deal. MP Nabil Basha from the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) confirmed to POL/E Chief that Noman met with the President one-on-one for two hours.

¶3. (C) Resident Director Heather Therrien of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), whose organization has been acting as an intermediary for the GPC and the JMP, told POL/E Chief, on February 11, that the process of finding a middle ground was proceeding. She also had heard the President and Noman were settling some "side issues." Overall, she said that both sides "seem happy." She added that she believed the issues remaining to be resolved were the JMP's demand for a proportional voting system, and the final makeup of the Supreme Council for Elections and Referenda (SCER). She expects both issues to be resolved in the near future.

¶4. (C) If the two sides, as Therrein expects, manage to reach an agreement on the issues under discussion, particularly if the proportional voting demand is dropped, it would be technically possible to hold the elections on their scheduled date (April 27). In reality, most observers believe that the opposition will want to review the work done by the existing SCER and this review will make the April date unfeasible. In fact, Tayeb told the Ambassador and DCM that both sides had agreed to a three to six month postponement but would not announce it until the two sides can iron out their final differences. At that moment, he said, the SCER will announce the postponement, framing it in technical vice political terms.

¶5. (C) Comment: This is not the first time that an end to the impasse over opposition participation in the elections has seemed close at hand. In recent days, however, the fast-approaching election date and stated fears by both sides that mishandling the election could irritate an already tense situation in Yemen's south, seem to have focused the parties on the need to reach a resolution. While a delay is not ideal, if it leads to reasonably free and fair elections with opposition participation, it will be better than the

alternative. End Comment.

SECHE